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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KABUL 003280

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TAGS: [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [AF](#)

SUBJECT: HANDICAPPING THE 2009 ELECTION: PASHTUNS AND
PRESIDENTS

REF: A. (A) KABUL 3190
[1](#)B. (B) KABUL 2896
[1](#)C. (C) KABUL 3111
[1](#)D. (D) KABUL 3812
[1](#)E. (E) KABUL 3084

Classified By: Ambassador William B. Wood, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Voter demographics, ethnic politics, and the electoral system together mean Afghanistan's next president almost certainly will be a Pashtun. For now, and for the foreseeable future, President Karzai is the Pashtuns' candidate, and the 2009 election is his to lose.

NUMBERS AND IDENTITIES

[1](#)2. (C) When Afghans divide along ethnic lines, Pashtuns gain a plurality over Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras as well as the smattering of other small ethnic groups. Although accurate population data on ethnicity do not exist (REF A), any of several approximations and analyses of the results of the 2004 presidential election show the same result: the "Pashtun vote" likely will be almost twice the size of any other ethnic bloc, at roughly 40 percent of the total.

[1](#)3. (C) The tradition and myth of Pashtun leadership of Afghanistan remains strong. Accustomed to ascendancy, regional Pashtun political leaders even complain that the present coalition government favors other ethnic groups (REF B.) The educational and economic advances that are reshaping attitudes among Tajiks and Uzbeks have yet to affect Pashtuns, who continue to uphold traditional social structures, values, and identities. Afghans of all origins, moreover, nostalgically refer to the reign of the last Pashtun king, Mohammed Zahir Shah, as a sort of golden age. A Tajik NGO leader in mid-December, for example, quoted statistics on the king's achievements in school and road construction as a yardstick for the Karzai government. On election day, these traditions mean that, even though some Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras might support a Pashtun candiQte, a Pashtun will vote only for a Pashtun.

[1](#)4. Q) The presidential election is from a national constituency: each vote, wherever cast, counts toward a candidate's total. If no candidate passes 50 per cent in the first round, a second round occurs. With Pashtuns voting only for Pashtuns, any non-Pashtun candidate or coalition faces the almost impossible task of outpacing a crowded field of candidates and rallying all the non-Pashtun votes to edge past 50 per cent for a first-round victory. The key question of Afghanistan's

ethnic politics is not how a non-Pashtun can win, but how a Pashtun forms a multi-ethnic alliance that tops off the Pashtun plurality vote.

OPPONENTS AND INCUMBENTS

15. (C) Karzai's opponents (REF C) understand this system, and much of the present controversy over the election date (REF D) is a proxy for ethnic political divisions. The Tajik-led United Front and Karzai's other opponents recognize that they lack the organizational structure, resources and frankly the ethnic face to build a Pashtun-inclusive, multi-ethnic coalition to run against the President, and that instead they will inevitably lose when the vote follows ethnic lines (REF E). As a result, these politicians are trying to discredit Karzai and the electoral process rather than organize themselves to run a credible alternative candidate. Or, even more likely, to position themselves for negotiations on key positions in a second Karzai Administration.

16. (C) As a candidate, Karzai will carry the disadvantages as well as advantages of incumbency. He must run on his record and polls show much of the public is disgusted with his government's ineffective performance and corrupt practices. Karzai retains, however, a political machine and the power of the government as well as the advantage of Pashtun tribal solidarity. If a second strong Pashtun runs and threatens to provide an opening for a non-Pashtun to build a 50 percent plus one coalition, we expect Pashtuns

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would rally to a single candidate, and Karzai's incumbency would clinch for him the tribal support. For the next year of election politics, the game will be the deals Karzai will make to cement his position with Pashtuns, discredit Pashtun and non-Pashtun rivals, and attract allies from among other ethnic groups.

Comment

17. (C) One can construct a number of scenarios in which Karzai loses. But they all hinge on a level of unity among the non-Pashtuns, and a willingness among Pashtuns to risk defeat by dividing their vote in order to challenge Karzai. We have not seen either so far. In fact, the current commentary focuses on successful Karzai deals with the Uzbeks and smaller groups, and disarray among the United Front, including the willingness of some UF players to cut a deal with Karzai.

WOOD